

A Hungarian Writer in the World of Cinema: Lajos (Ludvig) Biró (1990-1948)

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This study deals with a part of the long and eventful career of the Hungarian writer and political personality Lajos Biró. It is a revised version of a longer work that appeared in a book published in Hungarian in 2016.¹

Here I would like to acquaint my audience with a special aspect of Biró's work, an aspect that has been largely forgotten in Hungary, or more precisely, has been relegated to the not very respected category of "writing drama for export". But there is no reason to be ashamed of such activity, since some other great writers had done the same including Ferenc Molnár and Menyhért Lengyel.

Lajos Biró's activities span many fields. He was at once a writer, a journalist, editor and politician. He began his career as a journalist in Nagyvárad (today's Oradea in Romania) where he settled in 1900 virtually the same day as the poet Endre Ady. He became a close friend of his. Both in Nagyvárad and later in Budapest they lived in a room they rented together. To the very end of their lives they remained in contact. Biró was one of the few people who could have written much about twentieth century Hungary's outstanding through sometimes controversial genius. In 1904 the two of them also arrived about the same time in Budapest to join József Vészi's publication the *Budapesti Napló*. In those days this daily was the gathering place of the progressive writers who later comprised the editorial staff of the journal *Nyugat*: Dezső Kosztolányi, Gyula Szini, Endre Nagy, Géza Csáth, Géza Lengyel and others. The *Napló* persevered to the end with its demand for universal suffrage. Vészi deserted the daily to become the press manager of the government of Géza Fejérváry and took with him both Ady and Biró — an act that caused a great decline in the paper's popularity. In the meantime Biró married Jolán Vészi, about

¹ Ágnes Széchenyi, author and editor, *Pályaképek. Művelődéstörténeti metszetek a 20 századból* (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 2016).

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the same time that Ferenc Molnár also married into that family when he married Margit Vészi — and almost the entire family moved for some time to Berlin to await the cooling down of the controversy József Vészi had caused.

In the German capital Biró acted as correspondent of several Hungarian dailies. After his return home he participated in the launching of the progressive press-organ *Világ* — and became known as a combative editorial writer. He and his radicalism were not liked by the other side. He gave many lectures to the Galilei Circle, knew Károly Kernstock and Dezső Czigány, and was frequent speaker at the Művészház where the painters known as the *Nyolcak* [The Eight] exhibited their works. Throughout these years Biró published hundreds of journalistic pieces in Hungarian press organs, in Budapest and in other cities. He is considered to be an influential formulator of public opinion of his times. He was not only a practicing journalist but was a student of legislation regarding journalism, a scholar of journalistic traditions, and a theoretician of journalism. During his stay in Berlin he developed contacts with the publisher Ullstein. These relations he maintained during his years of emigration when he continued to act as an editor for the firm.

In 1914 we find Biró involved in the founding of the Hungarian Radical Party and he developed — and kept for a long time — close ties with one of the Party's leading lights, Oszkár Jászi. We cite only one quote from him which illustrates both his style and concerns in those tumultuous times. When Mihály Károlyi became the President of the Hungarian Republic in the fall of 1918 he wrote the following: "The Hungarian Republic offers the greatest honour that it can bestow on one of its citizens not as holiday gift, a glittering decoration. It presents it as a garland of thorns. Wear this, our appointed leader, until you collapse from the pain it causes." Biró himself couldn't tolerate for long the agony that serving the new regime brought. He was assistant to Jászi taking care of nationality affairs — which were the most contentious problems facing the Republic in the fall of 1918. The desire of the country's nationalities to separate — which he understood more than his compatriots — and worrying about the forthcoming peace settlement caused him to resign from his position. (In those days his name often came up in connection with the appointing of ambassadors since he was a sensible, highly cultured individual who spoke several languages.) He greeted the establishment of the Republic of Councils with high expectations and supported it through his writings. After the new regime's collapse he was forced into emigration. The story presented below starts with this development in his life.

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For North American readers we should add a relevant fact: in 1913 Biró's younger brother János, who would later be known as John Biro, emigrated to the United States. There he became the editor of the Hungarian daily *Amerikai Magyar Népszava*, and involved himself as an émigré intellectual in many progressive Hungarian-American causes. After Lajos arrived in the United States, he made a career for himself as a writer for the cinema. He was associated with the Korda brothers: Sándor Korda (who later became Sir Alexander Korda), Vince Korda and Zoltán Korda. We cannot say that there were no precedents for Lajos Biró involving himself with film. From his very first novels silent films had been made in Hungary in which later film critics detected certain elements essential to cinema. The film critic Antal Szerb saw in him a writer who was inclined toward complex plots and romanticism, and the writer Dezső Kosztolányi called him a representative of "redeeming literary cosmopolitanism". Kosztolányi found that Biró wrote in the style of telegraphic script, and Pál Relle thought that in Hungarian literature Biró was the inventor of the film. Kerr Alfred also wrote about him when he analysed the modern art of Hungarians in the journal *A hét* [The week]. He, like some others, regarded Biró a "manufacturer" of melodrama.

In the Hungary of today there is a renaissance of Biró's works: his books are being re-published and theatres again present his dramas. A few years ago the Nemzeti Színház [National Theatre] performed his play *Sárga liliom* [Yellow lily].

The émigré politician meets the world of cinema

Biró left Hungary during the summer of 1919. For a while he lived in Vienna's Hotel Klomser, the building in which the notorious Colonel Alfred Redl committed suicide in 1913. For some time he dreamed about a return to Hungary and provided news services for radical Hungarian émigrés living in Austria. He eked out a living by selling his writings, from theatrical royalties, and after meeting Sándor Korda, working with the new medium of film. Korda was also forced into emigration because during the Republic of Councils he had been in charge of expropriating cinema companies.¹ Their acquaintance dated back at least a decade. From 1912 on, the young Korda had been in charge of the film column of the daily the *Világ*, that is he was a colleague of Biró. Korda had also been the founder of several film magazines and kept writing for these and others.² He was only nineteen at the time but he was already writing articles

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dealing with film theory for the magazine *Mozgófénykép Híradó* [Moving-picture Journal] and was devising subtitles for foreign films; in 1914 he produced his first film: *A becsapott újságíró* [The deceived journalist]. His contacts with Biró continued throughout the decade. Not only with Biró but other young writers associated with the *Nyugat*, as film-historian István Nemeskürty explained in one of his studies:³ “Within *Nyugat* there was a special group of friends whose members [...] some evenings went to the cinema. [...] This group in a certain sense acknowledged Sándor Korda as its leader. Among them were the artists [Marcell] Vértess, [Henrik] Major, [Mihály] Biró, [Lipót] Gedő; and the writers Móricz, Somlyó, Andor Gábor, Lajos Biró, Kosztolányi and Lajos Nagy, [...]”.⁴ Korda once wrote an article about Biró, whom he respected, and Biró in turn patronized the much younger Korda in whom he probably saw himself at the time he was at the beginning of his career. In Vienna the well-connected Korda got a job as a script-writer for Biró. In the isolated world of émigrés their getting together was inevitable. Nevertheless Biró stayed away from the world of “as many coffee houses as many political parties” and avoided becoming involved in émigré in-fighting. His writings were not about his fellow émigrés but were critiques of the regime of Admiral Mikós Horthy that was consolidating itself in Hungary.⁵

For Biró the appearance of Korda in Vienna was a godsend. It helped him materially and rescued him from slumping into lethargy. Already in 1920 the two were shooting scenes of their joint film, the moderately successful *Koldus és királyfi* [The pauper and the prince] in the studios of the recently established Austrian film company Sascha Film-industrie. This was followed by a more substantial commission for Biró by Korda, the making of a film from his novel *Serpolette*, also under the aegis of the Sascha Company. The film was shot on scene, outdoors, on the Dalmatian coast. The cast was mainly Hungarian, but the film became an Austrian production: *Eine versunkene Welt*. The film was shown at the first post-war international film festival, in Milan’s *Concorso Cinematografico Internazionale*. Biró won first prize for script-writing.⁷ After this, one commission to produce a film followed another. Biró made a film based on his detective novel *A Molitorház* (1922). Soon, he would be working for Hollywood, the new-born Mecca of the film industry.⁸

Biró’s first visit to the United States, where his brother János had been living since 1913, came in 1922.⁹ Many who wrote about him testify that Biró was not a typical journalist: he was not a bohemian, he had affection for his family, especially his brother. In emigration he strove to help his wife to earn a living, he was attached to his daughter (who

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suffered from epilepsy), and when a niece of theirs was orphaned, they took her in.¹⁰ He was attracted by America, but he did not like to live in Hollywood. To understand his reservations about this place we have to turn to the experiences of Sándor Korda who also tried to integrate himself there and tried to become a Hollywood film-maker.¹¹ We cite a passage from the Korda legend:

Alex [Sándor] was dispirited, ill-at-ease and lonely. He was tormented by home-sickness and cultural shock. In Budapest, Berlin and Vienna he was a acknowledged producer [also a writer]. There [when he entered a restaurant] the head-waiters made sure that “Herr Korda” got the best table. Journalists sought interviews with him, with artists he discussed art, with politicians politics, with writers literature, and with financiers, finances.

This last statement was not true for Bidó — certainly not at that time. True, unlike in the case of his writer friends in Hungary, by this time his financial affairs were handled by agents. As for Korda, when he was sitting alone in an ocean-front establishment he pondered “what kind of a devilish fate made him end up in Los Angeles, three thousand miles from the nearest outpost of civilization [New York].”¹² Before the time of air-travel, Los Angeles was four-and-a-half days travel time with railway from the East Coast. To get from Los Angeles to Europe or back, was a major undertaking. And in the 1920s Los Angeles was not the place it is today. Where today film stars and multi-millionaires live there was desert. Many people who had come there regretted the decision and committed suicide — by simply walking into the sea. The noted European director, Alexander Korda, was regarded as someone that could be hired for a day — or as a technician. Everything depended on the producer.

Biró was not untouched by the bitter American experience. He wrote a novel with the simple title *Beszélgetés* [Talk] in which he compared his [and others'] American and European experiences. He placed the story into New York and not the emerging centre of the film world Hollywood. (In doing so he made the story more of an American story and less of what he himself experienced in Hollywood.) The protagonists of the story were mainly media or film moguls but with a few influential theatre personalities — both Americans and Europeans. The novel's main theme unfolds gradually, it reveals the life of Jesus though the name is not mentioned. The main protagonist comes from a godforsaken place that the people of the “big city” haven't even heard of. The story's hero is a young apprentice, an incredibly talented lad. He is received with reservations.

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Those who think in clichés, protested. Short-sighted businessmen don't realize that with this story they are put through a probe. The novel's conclusion is not at all heart-warming. The film-moguls are not freed by the author from being depicted as laughable. In the end the author among the novel's cast of characters is the one who is made to feel ashamed when his publisher tells him flatly that his story is ridiculous, that he doesn't know his audience and that "not one copy of his book would find a buyer."¹³ Relief for him comes when someone begins to talk of other things. The conflict of the two cultures, the American and the European, the clash between a mind-set focused on success and monetary gain on the one hand and that concerned with eternal values surfaces in this sadly ironic story.

This writing of Biró was published in 1926 by Pantheon Press in the volume entitled *Az élet arénája* [The arena of life]. It is clearly a reaction to Biró's first American experiences. The volume is a compendium of the writings Biró sent home from his involuntary exile and *Beszélgetés* is the last of such works that he wrote. It has many themes: the conflicts that faced émigrés, the difficulties of integration they experienced, and the unavoidable sacrifices they had to make. (It would be interesting to examine from these perspectives the experiences of the 1,400 German filmmakers who escaped to America in the Nazi Era, and those of the 100 Hungarians who left Hungary in 1919 and lived first mainly in Germany and then in the United States.)¹⁴

At the time Biró relied on heavily, one might say exclusively, on his friendship with Sándor Korda who reciprocated Biró's attachment to him. When Biró paid visits to Europe, Korda kept sending him letters complaining about his circumstances. The family lore of the Kordas places Biró at the highest point and Korda on one occasion admitted that for him the greatest consolation was the fact that he could work together with Biró.¹⁵ This assessment is confirmed by the literature about the two men.¹⁶ At the time he was a new arrival in Vienna, Biró told Oscar Jaszi that he wished to visit America for at least six months so that he could learn enough English to write for journals there.¹⁷ At the same time Biró was learning Italian too.¹⁸ Learning foreign languages is a complex process and needs to be commented on. To enter into another culture is only possible through learning its language and the more successful that process is the more thorough becomes our self-understanding. Assisting Biró in his quest to learn more languages was his association with the Korda brothers. At first during their exile they spoke Hungarian among themselves, but as they became more and more involved in film-making they began to perfect

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their language skills, began to speak languages idiomatically and did so without having to fear stumbling in the process.

Biró's family remained in Europe and with the advent of more normal political conditions in Hungary, returned there. József Veszi, Biró's father-in-law, in the 1920s was in charge of the paper *Pester Lloyd* and on his seventieth birthday, and the fiftieth anniversary of his journalistic career, he received an award from Miklós Horthy's regime. Biró himself became a frequent visitor to Hungary and there he often stayed with his wife and daughter who lived at times in Mária Valéria Street's Lloyd house and other times in the upper-class Klotild palace.¹⁹ Biró and his family also spent time in California — and complained about living conditions there. Testifying to this effect is a letter written by Biró's sister-in-law Margit Veszi in which she states that the Birós "are now in California" where they hate the whole unscrupulous business and don't escape from there only "because they make much money."²⁰ Biró did not want to return to Hungary either, he would have preferred to work in Berlin. He commuted between the western shores of America and Europe. By now he was a sought-after script writer who had been honoured by America's Film Academy. His fame extended to Hungary where journalists sought interviews with him and often reported his triumphs in bombastic language. The *Pesti Napló* described him a Hollywood's official Hungarian writer, and this was a modest characterization of him compared to others.²¹ There was heightened interest in cinema at the time in Hungary, especially after the appearance of the first "talkies". Up to then all of Biró's films had been silent ones. To his friends he said with some trepidation that the script of his latest film was for a talkie. He also predicted — and this is typical of progress which overtakes even the modernist of the age — that the talkie will bring a "catastrophe" for the cinema. The new films with sound will be in English and might result in the end of the particular blessing of the silent films: their appeal to a universal audience. He predicated that the careers of many European exile actors will be jeopardised if they cannot speak English. In any case for writers and actors success in the film business was often a matter of luck. Biró once talked of a "very talented" colleague of his who had to leave Hollywood completely dejected.²² At the same time he defended American cinema and disagreed with the writer Dezső Szabó according to whom Hollywood "poisoned writers" and "destroyed [the art of] drama." In Biró's view Hollywood was not dreadful even if it sometimes called itself such. It was a place, he argued, where "artistic tendencies could flourish, after all Hollywood

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attracted all kinds of talent from all corners of the world.” He cited the example of the movies *The Way of the Flesh* and *Seventh Heaven*.²³

Biró's years in England

The Korda brothers returned to Europe and settled in London. There, in 1932 they founded the company called London Film Productions. They came to Britain at a propitious time: the British film industry was nearly non-existent. The English film market was dominated by American films: at one point out of the one-hundred films being shown, ninety-five were made in America. In 1927 the British Parliament passed a quota-law for the advancement of home-produced films.²⁴

The company established by the Korda brothers was based on their cooperation. The firm's drama critic [*dramaturg*] was Biró who at the beginning even owned shares in the company.²⁵ In the Korda brothers' operation a *dramaturg* was an artistic-literary father figure who was in charge of inventing the story and the film's script. He devised the dialogue and the roles played by the actors. When Alex and Lajos selected the story, they spent weeks, sometimes months to make a movie out of it. They also determined which actor will play which role. The whole thing was formulated so that it confirmed to Alex's ideas, sense of humour and world view.²⁶

Sándor Korda's and Lajos Biró's collaboration resulted in brilliant successes such as the movie about the private life of Henry the Eighth. The film was more of a classic tale than an English nationalistic epic, but the British sense of self-deprecating humour allowed the ironical depiction of a national hero.²⁷ Biró and Korda had studied Shakespeare and the other English classics but in the end they did not select any such works as bases for their movies. What influenced them more was Francis Hackett's recently released biography of Henry.²⁸ Another consideration they kept in mind was what historical figures could the actor Charles Laughton credibly play. The movie about Henry was a success even in the commercial sense of that term. Its principal actor received an Oscar for his performance and the film got nominated for an Oscar in the “best picture” category. Korda and Biró experimented with other biographical films also, with less success.

The first reports in Hungary about Biró's successes appeared in the tabloid press. But now even a serious journal such as the *Nyugat* began taking notice of his career. It declared the film about Henry VIII a “great

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film, good film....” And that it had been “dreamed up” by Lajos Biró and “produced” by Sándor Korda with much money. “That they were not stingy with the money, was obvious from [the film’s] every scene.” “Such a film,” concluded the article in *Nyugat*, “competed with a good theatrical production, which is the most that can be said about a movie.”²⁹ The film was part of a series called “private lives” that had started with *Helen of Troy* produced in 1927 still in the United States. At a later date the *Nyugat* again reported about Biró and Korda in connection with the third film of the series and claimed that it was well received by such dailies as *The Morning Post*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Sunday Pictorial*, the *Evening Standard* and *The Daily Telegraph*.... “This enormous success was the *Private Life of Don Juan*.” The report went on to say that the English press mentioned the film’s script-writer and producer at times with the following words: “Story and dialogue by Lajos Biró. Directed by Alexander Korda.” The *Nyugat* article claimed that these two names are tops in the world and are examples of “our cultural superiority.”³⁰ These successes obscure the struggles and the risk-taking behind these films. In Biró’s opinion Korda had bet his shirt and pants on this film; had it failed, “Korda would have been left stark naked.”³¹

The film *Rembrandt* (1936) could have fit into this series. Korda had a deep interest in the painter and the foundering of his career. But the film produced about him was not an ironic one but a real drama — the best and most demanding Korda had produced. It was not a classic success. What Zsigmond Móricz said about this film is interesting. He found it true to life, produced with no money spared, with good taste, expertise and ambition — and with *hóhem* typical of someone from Pest.³² *Hóhem* is a Yiddish word with multiple meanings: self-confident, crafty, smart, a tramp, or an underworld figure. Its use by Móricz is a fine hint at Jewish talent and ability to get ahead.

Long before his successes in film, Biró had left the world of Hungarian literature. His writings had last appeared in book form in 1927. We can suspect that not even he strove for their re-publication — which did not happen till 1957. True, the Hungarian media did not forget about him. The *Nyugat*, for example, kept his name on its masthead between 1926 and 1929. In the latter year, when Zsigmond Móricz took on the task of saving the periodical from financial collapse, he wrote to Biró. The letter probably had antecedent as Móricz began it by saying that whoever claimed that the *Nyugat* and Cecile Tormay’s *Napkelet* should join forces was an “idiot”: “she is as far from us today as she had been yesterday...”³³ The rumour of these two periodicals getting together must have perturbed Biró

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— who was ill-at-ease with conservative Christian ideology. We should explain that the onset of the Great Depression negatively impacted the *Nyugat's* financial situation: its number of subscribers in Budapest declined to 390. Móricz wrote to Biró because he wanted to expand the periodical's circle of writers. He reminded Biró how great their collaboration had been many years ago and expressed the hope that Biró might start writing for the journal again. “[Leo] Tolstoy had also re-started writing after a decade's hiatus.” All this was in vain as Biró was gradually retiring from the world of Hungarian *belles-lettres*. He produced no such work during the rest of his life even though he did publish a volume in English.³⁴

The final years

In 1947 when a Hungarian journalist asked him if he no longer wrote in Hungarian Biró replied that he did: “I translated the prologue of Faust into Hungarian.”³⁵ The love of his native tongue prompted him to give a chance to a classic piece of writing to be translated to Hungarian but Biró went no further: the translation remained his and his only. He was also preoccupied with the conclusion that the Hungarian language could not be translated into other languages. With his daughter Vera, who had literary ambitions of her own, they tried to translate a particularly unique Hungarian saying into English and concluded that the resulting words sounded more like a grave-stone inscription than a true reflection of the original.³⁶ To the question whether he would ever come back to Hungary, Biró responded with a no: “I have lost contact with people who live [there] ... Every emigrant has to be aware of the reality right from the beginning of emigration: after the lapse of a certain time there is no return.”³⁷

Let us cite here the opinion of Ferenc Molnár, Biró's brother-in-law, on this question. He, already in his New York days, described emigration as a “sickness.”³⁸ While someone is a tourist in a certain place, he lives a normal life. But an émigré, after the passage of years, transmutes into an emigrant. At first, only his friends notice his symptoms: his unnerved nerves, the large volume — and little substance — of his complaints, his diminishing desire to communicate with his compatriots; and the deteriorating quality of his English because “he, in his advanced age, had given up the struggle to master a foreign language.” For such a person the first sign of the fact that he had become an émigré is the fact that he cannot sleep without a sleeping pill. With some people this symptom appears sooner, with others later. “With people who live alone,

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they appear sooner. With family men, later. With well-off people, later. With poor people sooner. Children don't get this illness: emigration is not a childhood disease...." As a person ages "he [or she] remains the same as he [or she] was while his [or her] surroundings differ more and more from what they in the beginning appeared." An émigré doesn't make peace with his surroundings, doesn't get used to the country he lives in, but gets used to his own situation. At this time his illness enters another phase. This condition is recognized by medical science: his doctor prescribes medications for him. And what can be done if the patient becomes disappointed in hapless doctors? For Molnár there was only one effective remedy: his friend Ferenc Göndör, the leftist editor of the New York émigré publication *Az Ember* — who happened to be a close associate of Biró's brother János. Göndör's special treatment for his "patient" was paying him attention: he phoned often, asked questions and provided pleasant news, invited him to his home and made peace between him and another émigré. Molnár wrote about all this but didn't say how Göndör succeeded with such treatment with his other "patients". And his "treatment" of Molnár had few long-term effects. For Molnár, this author who was locked into the world of Hungarian culture, exile in America proved a slow death. His career as a literary figure and his personal fate were sharply separated.

With the passage of time Biró lost most of his earlier contacts. He corresponded with Milan Füst and in the immediate post-World War II period gladly responded to this constantly complaining author's requests: good cigarettes, English thread, carbon-paper, razor blades, needles for injecting medications, even sleeping pills — and, sometimes, a little money. Biró was always generous. To Béla Reinitz, his friend and former chess and bridge partner, who had led a disorderly lifestyle and was incapable of concentrating on his work, he (as well as Korda) regularly sent money.⁴⁰ We have a record of his sending financial help to Frigyes Karinthy also.⁴¹ We also have documentation to the effect that Gyula Földessy suggested that in the matter of supporting Ady's mother, wealthy Jews such as Biró and Korda be approached as it was "no use" approaching wealthy Christians in this matter.⁴² We don't know whether Földessy's suggestion was implemented. We know however that Biró was part of the commemorative issue produced in Ady's honour by *Nyugat* and that he gave the farewell, grave-side address at Ady's funeral. The valuable collection of documents he held about Ady was sent to Géza Lengyel after Biró's death by his widow. We might also mention here that Ferenc Molnár, who otherwise was parsimonious, also aided his one-time friend

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Elek Falus who for some time lived in misery in post-war Hungary; as well Dániel Jób, the prominent theatre director who also fell on hard times after the war and, especially, after the communist takeover of power three years later.⁴³

Although Biró did not want to go back to Hungary, he continued to work hard. Death came to him unexpected in 1948 by which time Hungary's beginning socialist transformation was in plain view for many. In Hungary's *Huszadik Század* he was remembered with fond words by Géza Supka. In the American journal *Az Ember* Ferenc Göndör did the same. Both of them knew Biró well, and their ideal of a society was what they had dreamed up together at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the Hungarian daily *Népszava*, Zoltán Horváth hit on a more analytical and more critical note.⁴⁴ Horváth's connection to Biró is interesting. Biró was the uncle of Horváth's first wife Márta Molnar (better-known as Márta Sárközi) and Horváth might have known some things about Biró that others did not (despite this, his obituary contains many errors). Zoltán Horváth at the time was an ardent supporter of the union of Hungary's two labour parties. A decade later, after he spent time in communist dictator Mátyás Rákosi's prisons, he wrote a monograph about the early twentieth century radical civic movements. In this he claimed that in Biró the First World War caused the separation of the writer from the publicist. "And while [Biró] the publicist hit upon a tone that was increasingly radical and revolutionary, [Biró] the literary figure increasingly descended from [the writing] of fine novels... to the churning out of bestsellers and theatrical dramas for export." Horváth, who at the time employed a class-struggle analysis, attributed this fact to Biró being essentially a bourgeois individual. Horváth complained that at one point Biró gave the answer to the question whether Hungarian society, given the choice between a Parisian and a Moscovite system, came down on the side of the latter. It is possible that Biró had written such a statement. But this was more likely a politically compelled pronouncement — and we also have to keep in mind that at the end of World War I there was a fear in Hungary about what peace terms the victorious Western powers might impose on the country. And Horváth belittles Biró's achievements as a film-maker too. "From this time on," he writes, "[Biró's] life had nothing to do with the Hungarian people or with Hungarian literature. His works became merchandise and it makes little difference whether it was of good or bad quality." We have to keep in mind that this critique of Biró was produced from the narrow expectations of the day's "socialist" aesthetics.

Biró was a pioneer of the new medium of the twentieth century,

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the cinema. The nature of his talents played a role in the twists and turns of his life's career, as did the unexpected transformations brought about by politics. He was not averse to melodrama, he had a bias for deep feelings and sensationalistic solutions, and he was capable of writing works that some found substandard literature. It was a coincidence that the early cinema accepted these qualities — in fact appreciated them.⁴⁵ Biró became a celebrity of the art of producing film-scripts. All this does not hide the fact that he was a melancholic, even unhappy, person, but — from another perspective — a very successful émigré.

NOTES

This study was translated from the Hungarian by Nándor Dreisziger in consultation with its author.

¹ *A magyar film a tanácsköztársaság idején*, ed. Erzsébet Garai (Budapest: Magyar Filmtudományi Intézet, 1969).

² Korda's magazines included *Pesti Mozi*, *Mozi* and *Mozihét*. His writings deserve an anthology. Other writers who wrote for *Pesti Mozi* included Zoltán Ambrus, Zsigmond Móricz, Dezső Kosztolányi, Zoltán Somlyó and Frigyes Karinthy.

³ István Nemeskürty, "A Nyugat írói és a filmművészet a tízes években," *Irodalomtörténelmi Közlemények* 44, 4 (1960): 674-683.

⁴ Ibid., p. 681. István Várni reminiscences about the *Pesti Mozi* and Biró's denunciations of Tisza's policies in Viktor Lányi, István Radó, and Albert Held, *A 25 éves mozi: a magyar kinematográfia negyedszázados története* (Budapest: Bíró Ny., 1920), 74.

⁵ György Litván, "Irányzatok és viták a bécsi magyar emigrációban," in: *Magyar gondolat – szabad gondolat. Válogatott történelmi tanulmányok*, ed. and comp. János Gyurgyák (Budapest: Osiris, 2008), 227-260.

⁶ Gyöngyösi [sic] Balogh, "Die Anfänge zweiter internationaler Filmkarrieren: Mihály Kertész und Sándor Korda," in *Elektrische Schatten. Beiträge zur Österreichischen Stummfilmgeschichte*, ed. Francesco Bono, Paolo Cappaneale and Günter Krenn (Vienna: Filmarchiv Austria,

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1999), 77–100.

⁷ Herbert Polak, *30 Jahre Sascha-Film: Festschrift der Sascha-Film Verein- und Vertriebs-Ges. m. b. H. Wien* (Vienna, 1948).

⁸ Lewis Jacobs, *Rise of the American film* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1930); Gabler Neal, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (Crown, 1988); Allen J Scott, *Hollywood: the Place, the Industry* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁹ Documents concerning Biró's visa application are held in the National Archives of Hungary (Magyar Országos Levéltár): K 58 1922-III/1, bundle 14 (1021-1259). In the US János Biró (1881-1954) was a bank official and journalist. He was the editor of the Hungarian-American papers *Szabadság* and the *Képes Világlap*, and the editor-in-chief of the *Amerikai Magyar Népszava*. From 1916 on he was also the manager of the European department of the Sunbeam Motion Picture Co.

¹⁰ Széchenyi, "Vészi József a műhelyteremtő és a dinasztiaalapító, 1858-1940," in Széchenyi, *Pályaképek*, 17-40.

¹¹ Gene D. Phillips, *Exiles in Hollywood: Major European Film Directors in America* (Bethlehem – London: Lehigh University Press – Associated University Presses, 1998). This book describes the émigré years of five film-directors: Fritz Lang, Willam Wyler, Otto Preminger, Fred Zinnemann and Billy Wilder.

¹² Michael Korda, *A szerencse fiai. A Korda testvérek regényes élete* (Budapest: Európa, 1983), 101-106 (this is a Hungarian translation of the original book by Michael Korda: *Charmed Lives. A Family Romance* (New York: Random House, 1979). See also, Paul Tabori, *Alexander Korda* (London: Living Books Inc, 1966).

¹³ Lajos Biró, "Beszélgetés," in *Arabella*, ed. and comp. Ferenc Szabó (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1975), 307–315.

¹⁴ Rob Burns, ed., *German Cultural Studies. An Introduction* (Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), 30–36, 88–92. See also: Tibor Frank, *Double Exile: Migrations of Jewish-Hungarian Professionals through Germany to the United States, 1919-1945* (Oxford: Peter Lang,

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2009). About the difficult experiences of German émigrés in the US Thomas Mann has written especially in the journal *Aufbau*, 29 November 1939; cited in Tibor Frank, “Thomas Mann egy európai Magyarországon és az Egyesült Államokban, in *Idegen költők – örök barátaink. Világirodalom a magyar kulturális emlékezetben*, ed. Bálint Gárdos, Ágnes Péter, Veronika Ruttkay, Andrea Timár and Máté Vince (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2010), 160.

¹⁵ Korda, *A szerencse fiai*, 104.

¹⁶ The friendship lasted a lifetime. For Korda, the death of Biro in 1948 must have been a particularly great blow. From then on there was no one for Korda to confide in.

¹⁷ Letter, Biró to Jászi, 25 Dec. 1919. Oscar Jaszi Papers, box 5. Columbia University, Butler Library, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

¹⁸ Letter, Biró to Jászi, 24 Nov. 1919. Oscar Jaszi Papers, *loc. cit.*

¹⁹ Information from Gábor Márkus, conveyed to the author in 2007.

²⁰ Letter, Margit Veszi to Lajos Hatvany 4 April 1927, in *Levelek Hatvany Lajoshoz*, ed. and comp. Lajosné Hatvany (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1967), 371.

²¹ *Pesti Napló*, 4 March 1928. See also *Színházi Élet*, 7 Oct. 1928; and *A Toll*, 23 June 1929.

²² “Az ötvenéves Biró Lajos őszinte vallomása,” *Magyar Hírlap*, 20 Aug. 1930, 5-6.

²³ Sándor Faragó, “Biró Lajos csalódottan visszament Hollywoodba,” *Színházi Élet*, vol. 17, no. 41 (1927): 50-51. *The Way of all Flesh* was directed by Victor Fleming. The film’s script was produced by Biró, Jules Furthman, Julien Johnson and Ernest Maas. The movie’s principal actor, Emil Jannings (1884-1950) in 1929 won an Oscar. As far as we know no copies of the film survived. Biró was not part of the production of *Seventh Heaven*. Both films were melodramas.

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²⁴ *The British Film Industry. A report on its history and present organisation, with special reference to the economic problems of British feature film production* (London: PEP [Political & Economic Planning], 1952), 32-92, 294; Rachael Low, *The History of the British Film* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948), and *Pioneers of the British Film* (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1983); *Studies and Documents of a Pioneer of the Film Narrative* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998).

²⁵ Áron Tóbiás, *Korda Sándor* (Budapest: Magyar Filmtudományi Intézet és Filmarchívum – Népművelési Propaganda Iroda, [1980]), 46. Tóbiás's source was Vince Korda with whom he had a long interview in 1976.

²⁶ Michael Korda, *A szerencse fia*, 104.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

²⁸ Francis Hackett, *Personal History of Henry the Eighth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1929).

²⁹ László Lóránth, writing in *Nyugat*, vol. 27, no. 3 (1934).

³⁰ *Nyugat*, vol. 27, no. 19 (1934).

³¹ Cited in Tóbiás, *Korda Sándor*, p. 56.

³² Cited *ibid.*, p. 71.

³³ Letter, Móricz to Biró, 23 Dec. 1929. PIM Manuscript Archives, 1994, collection M 110.

³⁴ *Gods and Kings. Six plays by Lajos Biro* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1945).

³⁵ Guidó Majádi, "Interjú Biró Lajossal, az angol íróval," in *Szivárvány*, vol. 2, no. 42 (18 Oct. 1947), p. 7.

³⁶ Letter, Biró to Lajos Hatvany, 14 March [1940], *Levelek Hatvany Lajoshoz*, 534. The Hungarian phrase they tried to translate was "mentünk mendegéltünk, álltunk áldogáltunk, sírtunk sírdogáltunk."

³⁷ *Ibid.*

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³⁸ Ferenc Molnár, *Szülőfalu, Pest* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1962), 584-587.

³⁹ Ferenc Göndör (Kaposvár, 1885-New York, 1954), was a war correspondent in World War I. In 1919 he fled to Austria from where he emigrated to the US in 1926. He founded the liberal, left-of-centre journal *Az Emeber* late in 1918 — and took it with him first to Vienna and then to New York. It published till 1952.

⁴⁰ László Flórián and János Vajda, *Reinitz Béla*, (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó, 1978), 132-133, 150-151, 160-161.

⁴¹ Letter, Margit Veszi to Hatvany, 9 April 1936. *Levelek Hatvany Lajoshoz*, 489-490.

⁴² Undated letter, Földessy to Hatvany, *ibid.*, 437.

⁴³ Elek Falus (1880-1950), engraver, commercial artist. PIM manuscript collection V. 4326/197.

⁴⁴ Zoltán Horváth, “Biró Lajos 1880-19498,” *Népszava*, 11 Sept. 1948.

⁴⁵ Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity. Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 37-58.